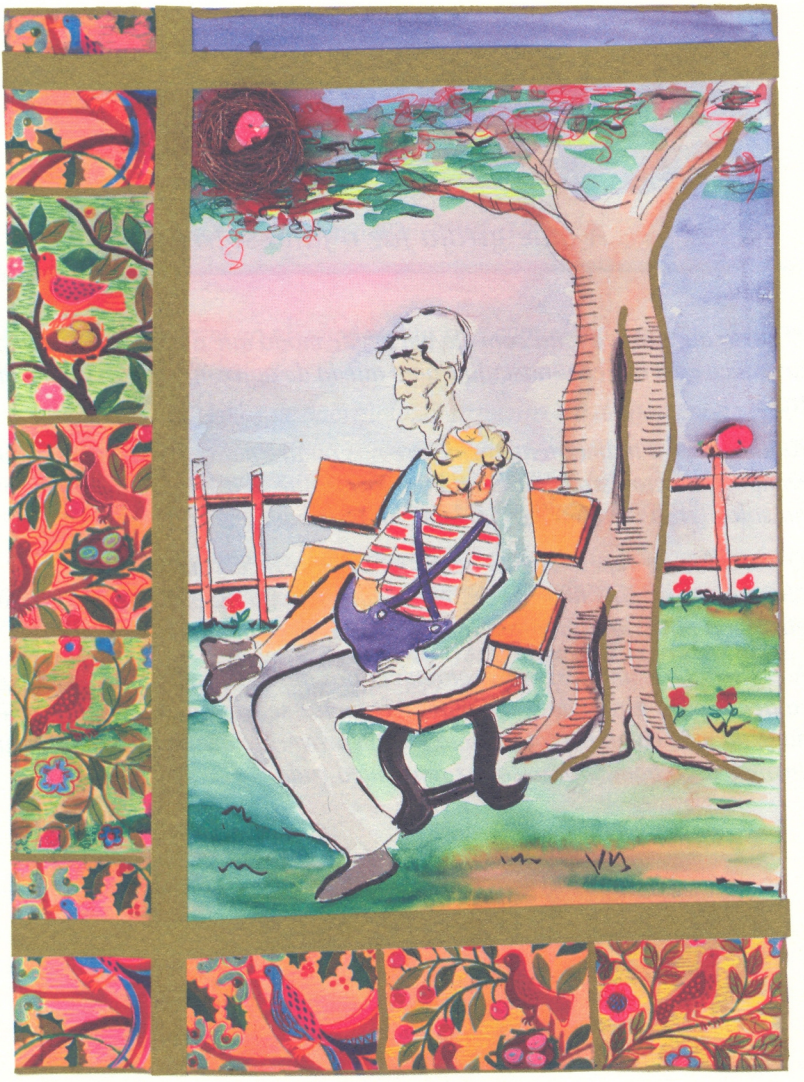
Paulo Coelho



Stories for Parents, Children and Grandchildren

Volume 2

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Paulo Coelho

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2008

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ISBN 978-0-557-01292-3

Published by Lulu

The three books

The monk Tetsugen had a dream: to publish a book in Japanese, containing all the sacred verses. Determined to transform this dream into reality, he began to travel the country in order to raise the necessary money.

However, just as he had managed to get together enough money to begin work on the project, the river Uji flooded, provoking a catastrophe of gigantic proportions. When he saw the victims of the flood, Tetsugen resolved to spend all the money he had collected on relieving the sufferings of the people.

Afterwards, he resumed his struggle to make his dream come true: he went from door to door, he visited the various islands of Japan, and once more he managed to raise the money he needed. When he returned, exultant, to Edo, a cholera epidemic was sweeping the country.

Again, the monk used the money to treat the sick and to help the families of the dead.

Undeterred, he returned to his original project. He set off again and, nearly twenty years later, he published seven thousand copies of the sacred verses.

They say that Tetsugen actually published three separate editions of the sacred texts, but the first two are invisible.

Another name

A man said to a friend:

'You talk about God as if you knew him personally, down to the colour of his eyes. Why do you need to create something to believe in? Can't you live without that?'

His friend replied:

'Do you have any idea how the Universe was created? Can you explain the miracle of life?'

'Everything around us is the result of chance. Things just happen.'

'Exactly. Well, "Things just happen" is merely another name for God.'

Respect my wishes

On his deathbed, Jacob summoned his wife, Sarah, to his side.

'Dear Sarah, I want to make my will. To my first-born, Abraham, I am going to leave half of my estate. He is, after all, a man of faith.'

'Oh, don't do that, Jacob! Abraham doesn't need all that money, he's got his own business; besides, he has faith in our religion. Leave it to Isaac, who is in such turmoil about whether or not God exists, and who has still not found his way in the world.'

'All right, I'll leave it to Isaac. And Abraham can have my shares.'

'Like I said, dear Jacob, Abraham doesn't need anything. I'll have the shares and I can always help out the children as and when.'

'You're quite right, Sarah. Now about the land we own in Israel. I think I'll leave it to Deborah.'

'To Deborah! Are you mad, Jacob? She's already got land in Israel. Do you want to make her into a businesswoman and ruin her marriage? I think our daughter Michele is much more in need of help.'

Mustering his last ounce of strength, Jacob sat up indignantly.

'My dear Sarah, you have been an excellent wife, an excellent mother, and I know you want the best for each of your children, but, please show some respect for my opinion. After all, who's dying here, you or me?'

Joy and love

A believer approached Rabbi Moche of Kobryn and asked:

'How should I best use my days so that God will be contented with my actions?'

'There is only one possible option: to live with love,' replied the Rabbi.

Minutes later, another follower approached him and asked the same question.

'There is only one possible option: try to live with joy.'

The first follower was taken aback.

'But the advice you gave me was different!'

'Not at all,' said the rabbi. 'It was exactly the same.'

Certainty and doubt

Buddha was gathered together with his disciples one morning, when a man came up to him.

'Does God exist?' he asked.

'He does,' replied Buddha.

After lunch, another man came up to him.

'Does God exist?' he asked.

'No, he doesn't,' said Buddha.

Later that afternoon, a third man asked the same question: 'Does God exist?'

'That's for you to decide,' replied Buddha.

As soon as the man had gone, one of his disciples remarked angrily:

'But that's absurd, Master! How can you possibly give such different answers to the same question?'

'Because they are all different people, and each one of them will reach God by his own

path. The first man will believe what I say. The second will do everything he can to prove me wrong. The third will only believe in what he is allowed to choose for himself.'

The screwdriver

Shortly before he died, my father-in-law summoned his family.

'I know that death is only a passageway into the next world. When I have gone through it, I will send you a sign that it really is worthwhile helping others in this life.' He wanted to be cremated and for his ashes to be scattered over Arpoador Beach while a tape recorder played his favourite music.

He died two days later. A friend arranged the cremation in São Paulo and - once back in Rio - we went straight to the beach armed with a tape recorder, tapes and the package containing the cremation urn. When we reached the sea, we got a surprise. The lid of the urn was firmly screwed down. We couldn't open it.

The only person around was a beggar, and he came over to us and asked: 'What's the problem?'

My brother-in-law said:

'We need a screwdriver so that we can get at my father's ashes inside this urn.'

'Well, he must have been a very good man, because I've just found this,' said the beggar.

And he held out a screwdriver.

Saving one's energies

Two rabbis are doing all they can to bring spiritual comfort to the Jews in Nazi Germany. Though in mortal fear of their lives, they nevertheless manage to fool the Gestapo - Hitler's fearsome police - and perform religious ceremonies in various communities.

They are finally discovered and imprisoned. One of the rabbis, terrified at the thought of what might happen next, spends all his time praying. The other rabbi, however, spends the whole day sleeping.

'How can you do that?' asks the first rabbi in alarm.

'I'm saving my energies because I know I'm going to need them.'

'But aren't you afraid? Don't you know what might happen to us?'

'Until we were imprisoned, I was scared to death, but now that I'm here in this cell, what's the point of being afraid of something that has already happened. The time for fear is past; now the time for hope has begun.'

We don't need you any more

One afternoon, the novices at the monastery of Sceta witnessed a monk insulting another monk. The superior, Abbot Sisois, asked the monk who had been insulted to forgive his aggressor.

'Certainly not,' came the reply. 'He did wrong and he'll have to pay.'

At that moment, Abbot Sisois raised his arms to heaven and began to pray:

'Jesus, we do not need You any more. We are perfectly capable of making aggressors pay for their offences. We can take vengeance into our own hands and deal with Good and Evil too. Therefore, O Lord, You need not worry about us any more.'

Ashamed, the monk who had been insulted immediately forgave his brother.

Thinking about future generations

When he was a young man, Abin-Alsar overheard a conversation his father had with a dervish.

'Be careful how you act,' said the dervish. 'Think about how your actions might affect future generations.'

'What have I got do with future generations?' said his father. 'I won't ever meet them. When I die, that will be that, and I don't care what my descendants say about me.'

Abin-Alsar never forgot this conversation. All his life, he tried to do good, to help people and to carry out his work with enthusiasm.

He became known as a man who cared about others. When he died, he left behind him a large number of charitable projects which

considerably improved the standard of living in his city.

He had ordered the following epitaph to be engraved on his tomb:

'A life that ends with death is a life not worth living.'

The monk and the prostitute

A monk lived near the temple of Shiva. In the house opposite lived a prostitute. Noticing the large number of men who visited her, the monk decided to speak to her.

'You are a great sinner,' he said sternly. 'You reveal your lack of respect for God every day and every night. Do you never stop to think about what will happen to you after your death?'

The poor woman was very shaken by what the monk said. She prayed to God out of genuine repentance, begging His forgiveness. She also asked the Almighty to help her to find another means of earning her living.

But she could find no other work and, after going hungry for a week, she returned to prostitution.

But each time she gave her body to a stranger, she would pray to the Lord for forgiveness.

Annoyed that his advice had had no effect, the monk thought to himself:

'From now on, I'm going to keep a count of the number of men who go into that house, until the day the sinner dies.'

And from that moment on, he did nothing but watch the comings and goings at the prostitute's house, and for each man who went in, he added a stone to a pile of stones by his side.

After some time, the monk again spoke to the prostitute and said:

'You see that pile of stones? Each stone represents a mortal sin committed by you, despite all my warnings. I say to you once more: do not sin again!'

Seeing how her sins accumulated, the woman began to tremble. Returning home, she wept tears of real repentance and prayed to God:

'O Lord, when will Your mercy free me from this wretched life?'

Her prayer was heard. That same day, the angel of death came to her house and carried her off. On God's orders, the angel crossed the street and took the monk with him too.

The prostitute's soul went straight up to Heaven, while the devils bore the monk down into Hell. They passed each other on the way, and when the monk saw what was happening, he cried out:

'Is this Your justice, O Lord? I spent my whole life in devotion and poverty and now I am carried off into Hell, while that prostitute, who lived all her life steeped in sin, is borne aloft up to Heaven!'

Hearing this, one of the angels replied:

'God's purposes are always just. You thought that God's love meant judging the behaviour of your neighbour. While you filled your heart with the impurity of another's sin, this woman prayed fervently day and night. Her soul is so light after all the tears she has shed

that we can easily bear her up to Paradise. Your soul is so weighed down with stones it is too heavy to lift.'

The older sister's question

When her brother was born, Sa-chi Gabriel begged her parents to leave her alone with the baby. They refused, fearing that, as with many four-year-olds, she was jealous and wanted to mistreat him.

But Sa-chi showed no signs of jealousy. And since she was always extremely affectionate towards her little brother, her parents decided to carry out an experiment. They left Sa-chi alone with their new-born baby, but kept the bedroom door ajar so that they could watch what she did.

Delighted to have her wish granted, little Sa-chi tiptoed over to the cradle, leaned over the baby and said:

'Tell me what God is like. I'm beginning to forget.'

Shelley and the drunk

After an exhausting morning spent talking to children, I go and have lunch with my lawyer friend, Shelley Mitchel. In the restaurant, we are given a table next to one occupied by a drunk, who insists on talking to us. He speaks of his pain when his wife left him, tells us how sad he is and asks us what he should do.

At one point, Shelley asks the drunk to be quiet, but he says:

'Why? I spoke of love as a sober man never would. I revealed my joys and my sorrows. I tried to make contact with two strangers. What's wrong with that?'

'It's not the right moment,' she says.

'Do you mean that there is a right moment to suffer for love?'

At these words, we invite the drunk to join us.

The reflection in the physical body

In the days when I practised Zen meditation, there always came a moment when the teacher would go over to one corner of the dojo (the room where the students gathered) and return carrying a bamboo cane. Any student who had failed to concentrate properly was asked to put up his or her hand; the teacher would then come over and strike each one three times on each shoulder.

On the first day, that seemed to me absurd and medieval. Later, I understood that it is often necessary to place spiritual suffering on a physical plane in order for us to see the evil that it causes. On the road to Santiago, I learned an exercise which consisted of digging the nail of

my index finger into my thumb whenever I had any harmful thoughts.

We only see the terrible consequences of negative thoughts much later, but by making them manifest on the physical plane - through pain - we soon come to realise the evil they cause and end up avoiding them.

In the queue at the shopping market

A priest from the Church of the Resurrection in Copacabana was patiently waiting his turn to buy some meat at the supermarket when a woman tried to jump the queue.

A stream of verbal insults burst forth from the other customers, and the woman responded with equal vehemence. Just as the situation was beginning to get out of hand, someone called out: 'Hey, lady, God loves you!'

'It was amazing,' the priest told me. 'At a moment when everyone was thinking about hate, someone spoke of love. All the ferment disappeared as if by magic. The woman walked back to her rightful place in the queue, and the

other customers apologised for having reacted so aggressively.'

How to see the All in everything

When Ketu was twelve, he was sent to a teacher, with whom he studied until he was twenty-four. When he had finished his apprenticeship, he returned home, feeling very proud.

His father said to him:

'How can we know something that we cannot see? How can we know that God, the Almighty, is everywhere?'

The young man began reciting the scriptures, but his father interrupted him:

'That's far too complicated. Isn't there a simpler way of learning about the existence of God?'

'Not that I know of, father. I'm an educated man now and I have to apply the education I

was given in order to explain the mysteries of divine knowledge.'

'I wasted my money sending you to that monastery,' cried his father.

And grabbing Ketu by the hand, he dragged him into the kitchen. There, he filled a basin with water and added a little salt. Then they went out for a walk around the town.

When they got home, his father said to Ketu:

'Bring me the salt that I put in the basin of water.'

Ketu looked for the salt, but couldn't find it because it had already dissolved in the water.

'So, you can't see the salt any more?' asked his father.

'No. The salt has become invisible.'

'Taste a bit of the water on the surface of the basin. What's it like?'

'Salty.'

'Taste a bit of the water from the middle. What's that like?'

'As salty as the water on the surface.'

'Now try the water at the bottom of the basin and tell me what that tastes like.'

Ketu tried it and it tasted exactly the same.

'You studied for all those years and yet you cannot explain in simple terms how the Invisible God can be everywhere at once,' said his father. 'By using a basin of water and calling God "salt", I could make even a peasant understand. My son, forget the kind of knowledge that separates us from men and go in search of the kind of inspiration that brings us closer.'

The thieving student

A student of the Zen master Bankei was caught stealing during a class. The other students demanded his expulsion, but Bankei decided to take no further action.

Days later, the student stole again, and the master still said nothing. Enraged, the other students demanded that the thief be punished, since such behaviour could not be tolerated.

'How wise you are!' said Bankei. 'You have learned how to tell right from wrong and can go and study anywhere. But this poor brother does not know right from wrong and only has me to teach him.'

The students never again doubted Bankei's wisdom and generosity, and the thief never stole again.

Life's rhythms

The Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis tells how, as a child, he found a cocoon attached to a tree and saw that the butterfly inside the cocoon was just preparing to emerge. He waited for some time, but because the process seemed so long drawn out, he decided to speed things up. He began to warm the cocoon with his breath. However, when the butterfly did finally emerge, its wings were still stuck together, and it died a short time afterwards.

'What it required was patient ripening by the sun, and I could not wait,' says Kazantzakis. 'Even now, that small corpse is one of the greatest weights I have on my conscience. But it taught me what is truly a mortal sin: to force the great laws of the universe. We must be patient and wait for the right moment and gladly follow the rhythm God has chosen for our life.'

Value and money

Ciccone German tells the story of a man who, thanks to his enormous wealth and infinite ambition, decided to buy everything he possibly could. Once he had filled his many houses with clothes, furniture, cars and jewels, the man decided to buy still more things.

He bought ethics and morality, and thus was born corruption.

He bought solidarity and generosity, and indifference came into being.

He bought justice and its laws, bringing impunity into the world.

He bought love and feelings, and the result was pain and remorse.

The most powerful man in the world bought all the material goods he wanted to possess and all the values he wanted to master.

Then one day, drunk on so much power, he decided to buy himself.

Despite all his money, he could not do it. At that precise moment, there was born in the consciousness of the Earth the only thing on which no one can put a price - self-worth.

Always running

The monk Shuan was always telling his students about the importance of studying ancient philosophy. One student, known for his iron will, made a note of all Shuan's teachings and spent the rest of the day reflecting on the ancient thinkers.

After a year spent studying, the student fell ill, but continued to attend the classes.

'I'm going to carry on studying even though I am ill. I'm on the trail of wisdom and there's no time to lose,' he said to his teacher.

Shuan replied:

'How do you know that wisdom is ahead of you and that you must run after it? Perhaps it's walking along behind you, trying to catch up, and you, in some way, are not allowing it to do so. Just relax and let your thoughts flow, for that too is a way of achieving wisdom.'

Encounter on 5th Avenue

I was just leaving St Patrick's Church in New York when a young Brazilian came over to me.

'It's great to see you,' he said, smiling. 'There's something I wanted to tell you.'

I was equally pleased at this encounter with a stranger. I invited him for a coffee, told him about my awful trip to Denver, and suggested that he go to Harlem on Sunday to attend a religious service there.

The young man, who was in his twenties, listened to me without saying a word.

I talked on. I said that I had just read a novel about a terrorist group that launches an attack on St Patrick's Church, and that the author had described the scene in such detail that I had noticed many things I had never seen

on previous visits. That was why I had decided to go to the church that morning.

We spent nearly an hour together, drank two coffees, and I dominated the entire conversation. Afterwards, we said goodbye, and I wished him a good trip.

'Thanks,' he said, moving off.

That was when I noticed the sad look in his eyes; something was wrong and I didn't know what. Only after walking a few blocks did I realise what it was: the young man had come over to me saying that there was something he needed to talk to me about.

During the whole time we spent together, I had been in control of the situation. At no point had I asked him what he wanted to tell me; in my desire to be friendly, I had filled up all the spaces, I hadn't allowed one moment of silence when the young man could have transformed a monologue into a dialogue.

He may have had something really important to share with me. Perhaps if I had been truly open to life at that moment, I too

would have had something to give to him. Perhaps both my life and his would have changed radically after that encounter. I will never know and I am not going to torture myself with the fact that I failed to take advantage of a potentially magical moment: mistakes happen.

But ever since then, I have tried to keep alive in my memory that farewell scene and the sad look in the boy's eyes. I was incapable of receiving what was destined for me and so was equally incapable of giving what I wanted to give, however hard I tried.

Encounter in Posto Seis

Father José Roberto from the Church of the Resurrection in Rio de Janeiro, was setting off early one morning when his car was stopped by three adolescents.

'We've been up all night, Father,' said one of them defiantly. 'Guess where we've been.'

Like any other normal human being, José Roberto chose to say nothing. He could imagine what being up all night at their age was likely to involve and he shuddered at the risks the boys must have taken and thought how worried their parents would be.

The boy who had initiated the conversation finally answered his own question.

'We were at the Church of Our Lady in Copacabana, praying to the Virgin. We left there on such a high that we walked all the way here [about 3 kilometres], singing, laughing and

talking to everyone we met. At least one person said to us: "Aren't you ashamed, boys of your age being drunk at this hour in the morning?"'

Father José Roberto started his car and set off for his appointment. On the way, he said to himself over and over: 'I let myself be taken in by appearances and I committed an injustice in my heart. When will we ever fully understand Jesus' words: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged, and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured unto you"?'

The right stone

A man once heard tell that, in a nearby desert, a certain alchemist had lost the result of years of work: the famous philosopher's stone, which could transform into gold any metal that it touched.

Driven by the desire to find it and to become rich, the man went to that desert. Since he did not know quite what the philosopher's stone looked like, he began picking up every stone he came across; he would then hold it to his belt buckle to see what happened.

A year passed, and then another, and still nothing. The man, however, clung obstinately to his desire to find the magical stone. Mechanically, he walked every valley and mountain in the desert, rubbing one pebble after another against his belt buckle.

One night, just before going to sleep, he noticed that his buckle had been changed into gold!

But which stone had it been? Had the miracle occurred during the morning or the evening? How long had it been, in fact, since he had bothered to check the results of all his efforts? What had started out as a search with a clear objective had become a mechanical, joyless exercise with no real goal. What had started out as an adventure had become dull duty.

Now he had no way of finding the right stone, because his belt buckle was already gold and no other transformation could possibly take place. He had followed the right road, but had failed to notice the miracle awaiting him.

The largest stones

The teacher placed a large glass jar on the table.

Then out of a bag he took ten stones, each the size of an orange, and began placing them, one by one, in the jar.

When the jar was filled to the brim with stones, he asked his students:

'Is it full?'

They all agreed that it was. The teacher, however, took some gravel from another bag and by jiggling the large stones around inside the jar, managed to fit in quite a lot of gravel.

'Is it full now?'

The students said, yes, this time it was definitely full. At that point, the teacher opened a third bag, this time full of fine sand, and he began to pour it into the jar. The sand filled up

any empty spaces between the large stones and the gravel, right up to the top.

'Right,' said the teacher. 'Now the jar is full. What do you think I've been trying to demonstrate to you?'

'That it doesn't matter how busy you are, there's always room to fit in something else,' said one student.

'Not at all. What this little demonstration shows us is that we have to put the large stones in first because, afterwards, they won't fit.

Now what are the important things in our lives? What are the plans we postpone, the adventures we never have, the loves we fail to fight for? Ask which are the large, solid stones that keep God's flame alive in you and put them into your jar of decisions now, because very soon there will be no room for them.'

The problem tree

The carpenter finished another day's work. As it was the weekend, he decided to invite a friend to come back home with him for a drink.

When he got to his house and before they went in, the carpenter stood for a few moments in silence before a tree growing in his garden. Then he touched its branches with both hands.

The expression on his face changed completely. He went into the house, smiling; he was greeted by his wife and children; he told them stories; and then he went out onto the verandah with his friend for a drink.

They could see the tree from there. Curiosity got the better of his friend and he asked the carpenter to explain his earlier behaviour.

'Oh, that's my problem tree,' said the carpenter. 'I know that I'm bound to have

problems at work, but those problems are mine, not my wife's or my children's. So, when I get home, I hang all my problems on that tree. The next day, before leaving for work, I pick them up again. The oddest thing is, though, that when I come out in the morning to get them, some of them have gone, while others seem much heavier than they were the previous night.'

Who is the teacher?

A disciple asked Nasrudin:

'How did you become a spiritual teacher?'

'We all know what we should do with our lives, but we always reject it,' replied Nasrudin. 'In order to understand that truth, I had to go through a rather strange experience.

One day, I was sitting by the roadside wondering what to do, when a man came over and stood in front of me. To get rid of him, I made a gesture, and he copied me. That amused me, so I made another gesture, which he again imitated, but this time adding another.

Then we started to sing and to do all kinds of exercises. I felt better and better and I came to really love my new companion. A few weeks passed and one day I asked him:

'Tell me, Teacher, what should I do next?'

And the man replied: 'But I thought you were the teacher!'

A saint
in the wrong place

'Why is it that some people can resolve the most complicated problems really easily, whilst others agonise over every tiny crisis and end up drowning in a glass of water?' I asked.

Ramesh replied by telling the following story:

'Once upon a time, there was a man who had been the soul of kindness all his life. When he died, everyone assumed that he would go straight to Heaven, for the only possible place for a good man like him was Paradise. The man wasn't particularly bothered about going to Heaven, but that was where he went.

Now in those days, service in heaven was not all that it might be. The reception desk was extremely inefficient, and the girl who received

him gave only a cursory glance through the index cards before her and when she couldn't find the man's name, she sent him straight to Hell.

And in Hell no one asks to check your badge or your invitation, for anyone who turns up is invited in. The man entered and stayed…

Some days later, Lucifer stormed up to the gates of Heaven to demand an explanation from St Peter.

"What you're doing is pure terrorism!" he said.

St Peter asked why Lucifer was so angry, and an enraged Lucifer replied:

"You sent that man down into Hell, and he's completely undermining me! Right from the start, there he was listening to people, looking them in the eye, talking to them. And now everyone's sharing their feelings and hugging and kissing. That's not the sort of thing I want in Hell! Please, let him into Heaven!'

When Ramesh had finished telling the story, he looked at me fondly and said:

'Live your life with so much love in your heart that if, by mistake, you were sent to Hell, the Devil himself would deliver you up to Paradise.'

I can't get in

Near Olite, in Spain, there is a ruined castle. I decide to visit the place and as I am standing there before it, a man at the door says:

'You can't come in.'

My intuition tells me that he is saying this for the pure pleasure of saying 'No'. I explain that I've come a long way, I try offering him a tip, I try being nice, I point out that this is, after all, a ruined castle…suddenly, going into that castle has become very important to me.

'You can't come in,' the man says again.

There is only one alternative: to carry on and see if he will physically prevent me from going in. I walk towards the door. He looks at me, but does nothing.

As I am leaving, two other tourists arrive and they too walk in. The old man does not try to stop them. I feel as if, thanks to my

resistance, the old man has decided to stop inventing ridiculous rules. Sometimes the world asks us to fight for things we do not understand and whose significance we will never discover.

Wings and roots

'Blessed is he who gives his children wings and roots,' says a proverb.

We need roots. There is a place in the world where we are born, where we learn a language, where we discover how our ancestors overcame their problems. At a given point, we become responsible for that place.

We need wings. They show us the endless horizons of the imagination, they carry us towards our dreams, they lead us to distant places. They are the wings that allow us to know the roots of our fellow human beings and to learn from them.

Blessed is he who has wings and roots, and wretched is he who only has one of the two.

Just passing through

An American tourist went to Cairo to visit the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Ayim. The tourist was surprised to see that the rabbi lived in a simple, book-lined room, in which the only pieces of furniture were a table and a bench.

'Rabbi, where's all your furniture?' asked the tourist.

'Why, where's yours?' retorted Hafez.

'Mine? But I'm just passing through.'

'So am I,' said the rabbi.

Convincing other people

A prophet went to a town in order to convert its inhabitants.

At first, the people were enthusiastic about what he told them, but, gradually, the day-to-day routine of spiritual life proved so difficult that men and women drifted away until there was not a single person left to listen to him.

A traveller, seeing the prophet preaching to no one, asked:

'Why do you continue exalting virtue and condemning vice when no one is there to listen to you?'

'At first, I hoped to change other people,' said the prophet. 'But now I continue preaching in order to stop those other people from changing me.'

After death

The emperor summoned the Zen master Gudo to his presence.

'Gudo, I have heard it said that you are a man who understands everything,' said the emperor. 'I would like to know what happens to both the enlightened man and the sinner when they die?'

'How should I know?' asked Gudo.

'Well, you're an enlightened teacher, aren't you?'

'Yes, but I'm not a dead teacher!'

I am part of the land

The wars between the conquerors of the American West and the Indians grew ever more violent. Shortly before he died, the father of Chief Joseph (1840-1904) called him to his side.

'My son, my body will soon return to Mother Earth,' he said. 'When I leave, this land is your inheritance. I am not leaving money or wealth, and the power you receive from me is not a motive for pride, but a responsibility. I leave in your hands our people and the ground that you walk on; I hope you will prove worthy of the task. Soon the white men will have us completely surrounded and they will try to buy our Mother. Remember that my body lies there and that I am part of Her.'

Joseph took his father's hand, pressed it to his breast and promised never to sell the land.

The white men tried to buy the land, and the chief refused to sell. The conflict grew ever bloodier, and Joseph led his army into battle against the American soldiers. When he was captured, he was asked why he was fighting to defend a lost cause.

'A man does not sell his father's bones,' he said.

A death foretold

In the mid 1970s, when he was about to complete his doctorate in physics, the scientist Stephen Hawking - who was already carrying the disease that would gradually paralyse all his movements - heard a doctor say of him that he had only two more years to live.

'Right then,' he thought to himself. 'now that I don't need to worry about things like pensions or paying the bills, I can concentrate on trying to understand the Universe.'

Since the disease was progressing rapidly, he was forced to come up with ways of explaining his ideas as simply and as briefly as possible.

Two and a half years went by, twenty years went by, and Hawking is still alive. He can communicate his highly abstract ideas through a tiny computer hooked up to his wheelchair and

which has a vocabulary of only 500 words. He wrote his classic A Brief History of Time and was responsible for creating an entirely new vision of modern physics.

Rather than leading him into a life of complete disability, the illness forced him to discover a new way of thinking.

Don't forget the bad men

The following prayer was found amongst the personal belongings of a Jew who died in a concentration camp:

Lord, when you come in Your glory, do not remember only the men of good, but remember too the men of evil.

And on the Day of Judgement, do not remember only the acts of cruelty, inhumanity and violence that they carried out, but remember too the fruits that they produced in us because of what they did to us. Remember the patience, courage, brotherly love, humility, generosity of spirit and faithfulness that our executioners awoke in our souls.

And then, Lord, may those fruits be used to save the souls of those men of evil.

True respect

During the evangelisation of Japan, a missionary was taken prisoner by samurai warriors.

'If you want to remain alive, tomorrow, in front of everyone, you will trample on the image of Christ,' said the samurai.

The missionary went to bed with not a doubt in his heart: he would never commit such a sacrilege, and he prepared himself for martyrdom.

He woke in the middle of the night and, when he got out of bed, he tripped over a man asleep on the floor. He almost fell back in astonishment: it was Jesus Christ in person!

'Now that you have trampled on me, go outside and trample on my image,' said Jesus. 'Fighting for an ideal is far more important than making a futile sacrifice.'

Destroying and rebuilding

I am invited to go to Guncan-Gima, the site of a Zen Buddhist temple. When I get there, I am surprised to see that the extraordinarily beautiful building, which is situated in the middle of a vast forest, is right next to a huge piece of waste ground.

I ask what the waste ground is for and the man in charge explains:

'That is where we will build the next temple. Every twenty years, we destroy the temple you see before you now and rebuild it again on the site next to it. This means that the monks who have trained as carpenters, stonemasons and architects are always using their practical skills and passing them on to their

apprentices. It also shows them that nothing in this life is eternal and that even temples are in need of constant improvement.'

Measuring love

'I've always wanted to know if I was capable of loving my wife as much as you love yours,' said the journalist Keichiro to my publisher Satoshi Gungi over supper one night.

'There is nothing else but love,' came the reply. 'It is love that keeps the world turning and the stars in their spheres.'

'I know. But how can I know if my love is big enough?'

'Ask yourself if you give yourself fully or if you flee from your emotions, but do not ask yourself if your love is big enough, because love is neither big nor small, it is simply love. You cannot measure a feeling the way you measure a road. If you do that, you will start comparing your love with what others tell you of theirs or with your own expectations of love. That way,

you will always be listening to some story, rather than following your own path.'

The eternal malcontent

Shanti was travelling from town to town, preaching the Divine word, when a man came to him hoping that he would cure his ills.

'Work, eat and praise God,' Shanti told him.

'When I work, my back hurts. When I eat, I get indigestion. When I drink, my throat burns. When I pray, I don't feel that God is listening to me.'

'Then find another teacher.'

The man left in disgust. Shanti remarked to those who had heard the conversation:

'He had two possible ways of looking at things and he always chose the worst one. When he dies, he'll probably complain about how cold it is in his grave.'

Choosing the best road

When Abbot Antonio was asked if the road of sacrifice led to Heaven, he replied:

'There are two such roads. The first is that of the man who mortifies his flesh and does penance because he believes that we are all damned. This man feels guilty and unworthy to live a happy life. He will never get anywhere because God does not inhabit guilt.

The second road is that of the man who knows that the world is not as perfect as we would all like it to be, but who nevertheless prays, does penance and puts time and effort into improving the world around him. In this case, the Divine Presence helps him all the time, and he will find Heaven.'

Stay in the desert

'Why do you live in the desert?' asked the gentleman.

'Because I cannot be what I want to be.'

'No one can, but we all have to try,' said the gentleman.

'It's impossible. When I start to be myself, people treat me with false reverence. When I am true to my faith, they begin to doubt me. They all believe that they are more saintly than I am, but they pretend to be sinners for fear of mocking my solitude. They are constantly trying to show me that they consider me a saint, and thus they become transformed into emissaries of the Devil, tempting me with pride.'

'Your problem lies not in trying to be who you are, but in not accepting how other people are. And if you carry on like that, you had best

stay in the desert,' said the gentleman, and with that he left.

I'm dying of hunger

The traveller arrived at the monastery in the middle of a snowstorm.

'I'm dying of cold and hunger and have no way of earning my livelihood, but I need to eat.'

It so happened that, on that very day, the storm had prevented the monks from restocking the pantry, and they had absolutely nothing to eat or drink. Touched by the man's plight, the Abbot opened the tabernacle and removed from it the consecrated hosts and the chalice of wine and offered them to the man to eat.

The other monks were horrified.

'That's sacrilege!'

'Why?' replied the Abbot. 'You have heard how David ate the bread from the tabernacle when he was hungry, and, when necessary, Christ healed people on the Sabbath. I am

merely putting the spirit of Jesus into action: love and mercy can now do their work.'

The city on the other side

A hermit from the monastery of Sceta approached Abbot Theodore:

'I know exactly what the purpose of life is. I know what God asks of man and I know the best way to serve Him. And yet, even so, I am incapable of doing everything I should be doing in order to serve the Lord.'

The Abbot remained silent for a long time. Then he said:

'You know that there is a city on the other side of the ocean, but you have not yet found the ship or placed your baggage on board and crossed the sea. Why then bother talking about it or about how we should walk its streets?

It is not enough to know what life is for or to know the best way to serve God. Put your

ideas into practice and the road will reveal itself to you.'

Do as others do

Abbot Pastor was out walking with a monk from Sceta when they were invited to a meal. The owner of the house, honoured by the monks' presence, ordered that only the very best of everything should be served.

However, the monk was in the middle of a period of fasting, and when the food arrived, he took a pea and chewed it very slowly. He ate only that one pea during the whole of supper.

On the way out, the Abbot called him over:

'Brother, when you go to visit someone, do not make an insult of your sanctity. The next time you are fasting simply decline any invitations to supper.'

The monk understood what the Abbot meant. From then on, whenever he was with other people, he did as they did.

Work in the fields

A boy crossed the desert and finally arrived at the monastery of Sceta, near Alexandria. There he asked and was given permission to attend one of the abbot's talks.

That afternoon, the abbot spoke of the importance of their work in the fields.

At the end of the talk, the boy said to one of the monks:

'I was really shocked. I expected to hear an enlightened sermon on sin and virtue, but the abbot talked only about tomatoes and irrigation and things like that. Where I come from we all believe that God is mercy and that all we have to do is pray.'

The monk smiled and said:

'Here we believe that God has done His part and now it is up to us to continue the process.'

Judging my brother

One of the monks at Sceta committed a grave fault, and the wisest hermit was summoned to judge him.

The hermit refused, but when the other monks insisted, he answered their call. He arrived carrying on his back a bucket with a hole in it, out of which sand was spilling.

'I came to judge my brother,' said the hermit to the monastery superior. 'My sins are spilling out behind me like the sand from this bucket, but since I don't look back and don't notice my own sins, I was summoned to judge my brother!'

The monks immediately gave up any idea of punishment.

Asking for alms

Part of the training of a Zen Buddhist monk is a practice known as takuhatsu - the begging pilgrimage. As well as helping the monasteries, which depend for their existence on donations, and teaching the student humility, this practice has another purpose too, that of purifying the town in which the monk lives.

This is because, according to Zen philosophy, the giver, the beggar and the alms money itself all form part of an important chain of equilibrium.

The person doing the begging does so because he is needy, but the person doing the giving also does so out of need.

The alms money serves as a link between these two needs, and the atmosphere in the town improves, since everyone is able to act in a way in which he or she needed to act.

Moses parts the waters

'Sometimes people get so used to what they see in films that they end up forgetting the real story,' says a friend, as we stand together looking out over Miami harbour. 'Do you remember The Ten Commandments?'

Of course I do. At one point, Moses - Charlton Heston - lifts up his rod, the waters part and the children of Israel cross over.

'In the Bible it's different,' says my friend. 'There, God says to Moses: "Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward." And only afterwards does he tell Moses to lift up his rod, and then the Red Sea parts.

It is only courage on the path itself that makes the path appear.'

Acting on impulse

Father Zeca, from the Church of the Resurrection in Copacabana, tells of how, when he was travelling on a bus, he suddenly heard a voice telling him to get up and preach the word of Christ right there and then.

Zeca started talking to the voice: 'They'll think I'm ridiculous, this isn't the place for a sermon,' he said. But something inside him insisted that he speak. 'I'm too shy, please don't ask me to do this,' he begged.

The inner impulse insisted.

Then he remembered his promise - to surrender himself to all Christ's purposes. He got up - dying of embarrassment - and began to talk about the Gospel. Everyone listened in silence. He looked at each passenger in turn and very few looked away. He said everything that

was in his heart, ended his sermon and sat down again.

He still does not know what task he fulfilled that day, but he is absolutely certain that he did fulfil a task.

Enjoying God's gifts

I must enjoy all the gifts that God gives me today. These gifts cannot be saved up. There is no bank in which we can place the gifts we receive from God in order to use them when we wish. If I do not make use of these blessings, I will lose them for ever.

God knows that we are all artists of life. One day, he gives us a chisel to make a sculpture, the next, brushes and a canvas, another day, he gives us a pen to write with. But we cannot use a chisel to paint a canvas or a pen to make a sculpture. Each day has its own miracle. I must accept today's blessings in order to create what I have; if I do this with detachment and without guilt, tomorrow I will receive more.

Mojud and the inexplicable life

Mojud was a civil servant in a government department in a small town in the interior. He had no prospect of ever getting a better job, the country was going through a major economic crisis, and he had resigned himself to spending the rest of his life working eight hours a day and trying to enjoy himself in the evenings and at weekends, watching television.

One afternoon, Mojud saw two cockerels fighting. Feeling sorry for the creatures, he strode into the middle of the square to separate them, not realising that he was interrupting a cockfight. The angry spectators attacked Mojud. One of them threatened to kill him because his cockerel had looked set to win, and he would have won a fortune in stake money.

Mojud was afraid and decided to leave town. People were surprised when he did not turn up for work, but since there were several other candidates for the post, they soon forgot all about the former civil servant.

After travelling for three days, Mojud met a fisherman.

'Where are you going?' asked the fisherman.

'I don't know.'

Touched by Mojud's situation, the fisherman took him home with him. After a night of talking, he discovered that Mojud knew how to read and so he proposed a deal: he would teach the new arrival to fish in exchange for lessons in reading and writing.

Mojud learned how to fish. With the money he earned by selling the fish, he bought books with which to teach the fisherman to read. By reading, Mojud learned things he had never known.

For example, one of the books was about joinery, and Mojud decided to set up a small workshop.

He and the fisherman bought tools and went on to make tables, chairs, shelves and fishing tackle.

Many years passed. The two men continued to fish and they spent their time on the river observing nature. They both continued to study, and the many books they read revealed to them the human soul. They both continued to work in the joinery, and the physical work made them healthy and strong.

Mojud loved talking to the customers. Since he was now a wise, cultivated, healthy man, people came to him for advice. The whole town began to make progress because everyone saw in Mojud someone who could find effective solutions to the region's problems.

The young men in the town formed a study group with Mojud and the fisherman, and then told everyone that they were the disciples of two wise men. One day, one of the young men asked Mojud:

'Did you give up everything in order to devote yourself to the search for knowledge?'

'No,' said Mojud, 'I ran away from the town where I lived because I was afraid of being murdered.'

Nevertheless, the disciples learned important things and passed them on to others. A famous biographer was summoned to write the lives of the Two Wise Men, as they were now known. Mojud and the fisherman told him the facts.

'But none of that reflects your wisdom,' said the biographer.

'No, you're right,' replied Mojud, 'but the fact is that nothing very special happened in our lives.'

The biographer wrote for five months. When the book was published, it became a huge best-seller. It was the marvellous and exciting story of two men who go in search of knowledge, give up everything they are doing, do battle against adversity and encounter obscure and secret teachers.

'That's not what it was like at all,' said Mojud, when he read the biography.

'Saints must lead exciting lives,' replied the biographer. 'A story must teach something, and reality never teaches anything.'

Mojud gave up trying to argue with him. He knew that reality teaches a man everything he needs to know, but there was no point in trying to explain.

'Let the fools live with their fantasies,' he said to the fisherman.

And they continued to read, write and fish, to work in the joinery, to teach their disciples and to do good. They both promised, however, never to read any more lives of saints, because the people who write such books do not understand one very simple truth: everything that an ordinary man does in his life brings him closer to God.

(Inspired by a Sufi story.)

Forgiving one's enemies

An abbot met his favourite student and enquired after his spiritual progress. The student replied that he was managing to devote every moment of his day to God.

'Now all you need to do is to forgive your enemies.'

The young man was shocked:

'But I don't need to! I'm not angry with my enemies!'

'Do you think God is angry with you?'

'Of course not!'

'And yet you still ask Him for His forgiveness, don't you? Do the same with your enemies, even if you don't hate them. By forgiving someone, you are washing and perfuming your own soul.'

The undesirable visitors

'We have no doors in our monastery,' Shanti said to the visitor.

'And what do you do about thieves?'

'We have nothing of value inside. If we had, we would have given it to those in need.'

'And what about troublesome people who come to disturb your peace?'

'We ignore them, and eventually they go away,' said Shanti.

'Is that all? And does it work?'

Shanti did not reply. The visitor repeated his question a few times, but seeing that he got no response, he decided to leave.

'You see how well it works,' said Shanti to himself, smiling.

The drunken disciple

A Zen master had hundreds of disciples. They all prayed when they were supposed to pray, except for one, who spent all his time drunk.

The master grew older. Some of the more virtuous students began talking about who would be the new leader of the group, the one to whom the important secrets of the Tradition would be passed on.

On the eve of his death, however, the master summoned the drunken student and passed on the secrets to him.

The other disciples were in uproar.

'It's shameful!' they proclaimed loudly in the streets. 'We have been sacrificing ourselves for the wrong master, one who has failed to see our qualities.'

Hearing the hubbub outside, the dying master remarked:

'I needed to pass on those secrets to a man I knew well. All my students are terribly virtuous and only show their good qualities. That is dangerous, for virtue often serves to hide vanity, pride and intolerance. That is why I chose the one student I knew really well, the one whose faults I could see most clearly.'

The toad and the hot water

Various biological studies have shown that if a toad is placed in a container along with water from his own pond, he will remain there, utterly still, while the water is heated, even when the water reaches boiling point. The toad does not react to the gradual increase in temperature and dies when the water boils.

Fat and happy.

On the other hand, if a toad is thrown into that container when the water is already boiling, he will jump straight out again, scalded, but alive!

Sometimes we behave like the boiled toads. We do not notice changes. We think that everything is fine and that anything bad in our lives will simply go away - that it's just a matter

of time. We are close to death, but still we sit, unchanging and apathetic, while the water around us gets hotter by the minute. We end up dying, fat and happy, without having noticed the changes going on around us.

Boiled toads do not understand that, as well as being efficient (doing things right), they need to be effective (doing the right things). And for this to happen, there must be continual growth, with room for dialogue and clear communication, room to share and to plan and to build an adult relationship. The biggest challenge lies in having the humility to respect someone else's views.

There are, however, boiled toads who still believe that the most important thing is obedience, not competence: those who can, lead, but those with any sense, obey. And where does this leave real life? It is far better to emerge from a situation slightly scalded, but still alive and ready to act.

The Lesson of the Butterfly

A man spent hours watching a butterfly struggling to emerge from its cocoon. It managed to make a small hole, but its body was too large to get through it. After a long struggle, it appeared to be exhausted and remained absolutely still.

The man decided to help the butterfly and, with a pair of scissors, he cut open the cocoon, thus releasing the butterfly. However, the butterfly's body was very small and wrinkled and its wings were all crumpled.

The man continued to watch, hoping that, at any moment, the butterfly would open its wings and fly away. Nothing happened; in fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its brief life

dragging around its shrunken body and shrivelled wings, incapable of flight.

What the man - out of kindness and his eagerness to help - had failed to understand was that the tight cocoon and the efforts that the butterfly had to make in order to squeeze out of that tiny hole were Nature's way of training the butterfly and of strengthening its wings.

Sometimes, a little extra effort is precisely what prepares us for the next obstacle to be faced. Anyone who refuses to make that effort, or gets the wrong sort of help, is left unprepared to fight the next battle and never manages to fly off to their destiny.

(Adapted from a story sent in by Sonaira D'Avila)

Reflecting on what one has learned

Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah used to say:

'Those who are open to life's lessons and who do not live on a diet of prejudices are like a blank sheet of paper on which God writes his words in divine ink.

Those who view the world through cynical, prejudiced eyes are like a sheet of paper that has already been filled and on which there is no room for any new words.

Do not concern yourself with what you know or what you do not know. Do not think about the past or the future, merely allow God's hands to write the surprises of the present on each new day.'

The bicycle race

Life is a great bicycle race, whose goal is the fulfilment of one's Personal Legend.

We all set off together, sharing our friendship and enthusiasm. But as the race progresses, that initial happiness fades before some very real challenges: tiredness, boredom, doubts about our own abilities.

We notice that a few friends have given up - they are still cycling, but only because they cannot stop in the middle of the road; there are a lot of them, pedalling dutifully along beside the support vehicle, talking amongst themselves.

We finally leave them behind, and then we come face to face with loneliness, unfamiliar bends in the road, mechanical problems with the bike. And after a while, we start to ask ourselves if it's really worth all the effort.

Yes, it is. It's just a question of not giving up.

St Augustine and logic

God speaks to us through signs. It is a highly individual language which requires us to have faith and discipline if we are fully to absorb it.

This is how St Augustine was converted. He had spent years searching in various philosophies for an answer to the meaning of life. One evening, in the garden of his house in Milan, he was reflecting on the utter failure of his search when he heard the sing-song voice of a child saying: 'Pick it up and read it! Pick it up and read it!'

Although he had always been ruled by logic, he decided, on an impulse, to open the first book that came to hand. It was the Bible, and he read part of an epistle by St Paul, which contained all the answers he was looking for.

From then on, Augustine's logic made room for faith, and he became one of the Church's greatest theologians.

The four forces

Father Alan Jones says that in order to build our soul we need the Four Invisible Forces: love, death, power and time.

We must love because we are loved by God. We must have an awareness of death in order to understand life fully.

We must struggle in order to grow, but without becoming entrapped by the power that is gained through that struggle, because we know that power is worthless.

Finally, we must accept that our soul, although eternal, is at this moment caught in the web of time, with all its opportunities and limitations. We must therefore behave as if time existed and do everything we can to value each second.

These Four Forces cannot be treated as problems to be solved because they are beyond

our control. We must accept them and let them teach us what we need to learn.

Blaming others

We have all at one time or another heard our mother say of us: 'My child did this or that on some impulse, but, deep down, he's a very good person.'

It is one thing to live one's life blaming ourselves for thoughtless actions that led us astray; guilt doesn't get us anywhere and it can even remove any stimulus to improve. It is quite another thing, however, to forgive ourselves for everything; that way we will never be able to set ourselves on the right path again.

There is also common sense, and we should judge the results of our actions and not the intentions behind them. Deep down, everyone is good, but that's irrelevant.

Jesus said: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'

An old Arab proverb says: 'God judges a tree by its fruits, not by its roots.'

How to do what I want

When he died, Juan found himself in an exquisite place, surrounded by all the comfort and beauty he had always dreamed of. A man dressed in white spoke to him:

'You can have anything you want, any food, any pleasure, any diversion,' he said.

Delighted, Juan did everything he had dreamed of doing while alive. Then, after many years of pleasure, he again searched out the man in white.

'I've done everything I wanted to do. Now I need a job, so that I can feel useful,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' replied the man in white. 'But that is the one thing I can't give you; there is no work here.'

'How awful!' said Juan angrily. 'That means I'll spend all eternity bored to death! I wish I was in Hell!'

The man in white came over to him and said softly:

'And where exactly do you think you are, sir?'

The meaning of the crowns

When Moses ascended into the heavens to write one particular part of the Bible, the Almighty asked him to draw little crowns above certain letters of the Torah.

Moses said: 'Creator of the Universe, why do you want me to add those crowns?'

'Because in a hundred generations' time, a man named Akiva will reveal the true meaning of those drawings.'

'Show me this man's interpretation,' Moses asked.

The Lord carried Moses into the future and placed him in one of Rabbi Akiva's classes. A student said:

'Rabbi, why are there crowns drawn above some of the letters?'

'I don't know,' replied Akiva. 'And I do not think that Moses knew either. But since he was the greatest of all the prophets, he did this merely to teach us that, even though we may not understand everything that the Lord does, we must nevertheless do as he asks.'

And Moses begged the Lord's forgiveness.

Being the devil isn't easy

The devil said to Buddha:

'Being the devil isn't easy. I always have to speak in riddles so that people won't notice that I'm tempting them. I always have to appear bright and intelligent to gain their admiration. I have to put a lot of energy into trying to persuade my disciples that Hell is more interesting than Heaven. I am old now and I would like to pass my students on to you.'

Buddha knew that this was a trap: if he accepted the proposal, he himself would become the devil, and the devil would become Buddha.

'You think it's fun being Buddha,' he replied. 'But as well as doing everything that you have to do, I also have to put up with the things my students do to me! They place words in my mouth that I never spoke, they earn money

from my teachings and expect me to be wise all the time! You would never be able to stand such a life!'

This argument convinced the devil that changing roles really wasn't such a good idea, and Buddha escaped temptation.

The power of the word

Of all the powerful weapons of destruction that man has invented, the most terrible - and the most cowardly - is the word.

Knives and firearms leave traces of blood. Bombs shake whole buildings and streets. Poisons can always be detected.

But a destructive word can provoke Evil without leaving behind it a single clue. Children are subject to years of conditioning by their parents, artists are mercilessly pilloried, women are systematically undermined by remarks made by their husbands, the faithful are kept apart from religion by those who judge themselves capable of interpreting the voice of God.

Check to see if you yourself are using this weapon. Check to see if someone is using this weapon on you. And put a stop to both.

Apollo and Daphne

The god Apollo pursues the nymph Daphne into the woods. He is in love with her, but Daphne - who is always being courted by everyone - can no longer bear her own splendour and calls on the gods to help her, saying:

'Destroy this beauty that never allows me any peace.'

The gods hear Daphne's plea and transform her into a tree. Apollo cannot find her, for she is now merely part of the vegetation.

Daphne behaved in a way that is familiar to us all: we often destroy our own talents because we do not know what to do with them.

The mediocrity of being 'just another person' is more comfortable than the struggle to

reveal everything we are capable of, using the gifts that God gave us.

No two paths are the same

In one of his rare writings, the Sufi sage Hafik says of the spiritual search:

'Accept with wisdom the fact that the Path is full of contradictions. The Path often hides itself in order to stimulate the traveller to discover what lies beyond the next bend.

If two travelling companions are following the same path, then one of them is clearly following a false trail. For there are no formulae for finding the truth of the Path, and each person needs to run the risks incurred by his own steps.

Only the ignorant try to imitate the behaviour of others. Intelligent men do not waste their time like that; they develop their own abilities; they know that in a forest of a

hundred thousand trees, no two leaves are the same, just as no two journeys along the same Path are the same.'

Miss Cockroach and the coin

An old children's story tells of Miss Cockroach, who found a coin as she was sweeping out her house. After a long time spent at her window, choosing the right mate to accommodate all her fears and anxieties, she ended up marrying John Shrew. And as everyone knows, John Shrew fell in the stew.

Often in our lives, we find a coin that has been given to us by fate, and we believe it to be the one treasure of our lives. We end up placing so much value on that one thing that fate - the same fate that gave us the coin - decides to take it back.

Those who are afraid of making a choice, always choose wrongly.

Copying the teacher

A disciple who loved and admired his teacher decided to observe his behaviour minutely, believing that if he did everything that his teacher did, then he would also acquire his teacher's wisdom.

The teacher always wore white, and so his disciple did the same.

The teacher was a vegetarian, and so his disciple stopped eating meat and replaced it with a diet of vegetables and herbs.

The teacher was an austere man, and so the disciple decided to devote himself to self-sacrifice and started sleeping on a straw mattress.

After some time, the teacher noticed these changes in his disciple's behaviour and asked him why.

'I am climbing the steps of initiation,' came the reply. 'The white of my clothes shows the simplicity of my search, the vegetarian food purifies my body, and the lack of comfort makes me think only of spiritual things.'

Smiling, the teacher took him to a field where a horse was grazing.

'You have spent all this time looking outside yourself, which is what matters least,' he said. 'Do you see that creature there? He has white skin, eats only grass and sleeps in a stable on a straw bed. Do you think he has the face of a saint or will one day become a real teacher?'.

Why God left man until the sixth day

A group of wise men met together in a castle in Akbar to discuss God's works; they wanted to know why he had left creating man until the sixth day.

'He wanted to get the Universe sorted out first so that we could have all its marvels at our disposal,' said one.

'He wanted to experiment with animals first so that he wouldn't make the same mistakes when he created us,' argued another.

A wise Jew turned up at the meeting. He was told the subject of discussion: 'In your opinion why did God create man only on the final day?'

'Very simple,' said the wise man. 'So that whenever we were afflicted by pride, we could

reflect that, in the Divine scheme, even a mere mosquito had priority over us.'

The exorcism

A man called in a priest to perform an exorcism in his house. He then went to stay in a hotel and left the priest to his work.

The priest spent a few days sleeping in the haunted house. He sprinkled holy water in all the rooms, said prayers, and, when he judged his task to be done, he summoned the owner, saying that the results had been fantastic.

'How many demons did you exorcise?' the owner asked.

'None.'

'And how many did you see in my house?'

'None.'

'Then how can you say that the results were fantastic?'

'When one is fighting the forces of evil, then none is more than enough.'

Charity under threat

Some time ago, my wife went to the aid of a Swiss tourist in Ipanema, who claimed that he had been robbed by some street children. Speaking appalling Portuguese in a thick foreign accent, he said that he had been left without his passport, without any money and with nowhere to sleep.

My wife bought him lunch, gave him enough cash to pay for a hotel room for the night while he got in touch with his embassy, and then left. Days later, a Rio newspaper reported that this 'Swiss tourist' was, in fact, an inventive con-artist who put on an accent and abused the good faith of those of us who love Rio and want to undo the negative image - justified or not - which has become our postcard.

When she read the article, my wife simply said: 'Well, that's not going to stop me helping anyone.'

Her remark reminded me of the story of a wise man who moved to the city of Akbar. No one took much notice of him, and his teachings were not taken up by the populace. After a time, he became the object of their mockery and their ironic comments.

One day, while he was walking down the main street in Akbar, a group of men and women began insulting him. Instead of pretending that he had not noticed, the wise man turned to them and blessed them.

One of the men said:

'Are you deaf too? We called you the foulest of names and yet you respond with sweet words!'

'We can each of us only offer what we have,' came the wise man's reply.

Negative desires

A disciple said to his teacher:

'I have spent a large part of my day thinking things I should not think, desiring things I should not desire, and making plans I should not make.'

The teacher invited his disciple to go for a walk with him in a forest near his house. On the way, he pointed to a plant and asked if the disciple knew what it was.

'It's deadly nightshade,' said the disciple. 'The leaves can kill you if you eat them.'

'But they cannot kill you if you merely look at them. In exactly the same way, negative desires are entirely harmless unless you give in to them.'

Does the teacher suffer if he has bad disciples?

A disciple said to Firoz:

'The mere presence of a teacher inevitably attracts all kinds of inquisitive people, eager to discover something to their own advantage. Could that prove prejudicial to the teacher or a negative influence? Could that not turn the teacher from his path or cause him to suffer because he failed to teach what he intended to teach?'

Firoz, the Sufi master, replied:

'The sight of a pineapple tree laden with fruit awakens the appetite of everyone who passes by. If someone chooses to eat more than his fill, he will end up consuming too many pineapples and will suffer the consequences. The owner of the tree doesn't get indigestion

though. It is the same thing with the Search. The path must be open to all, but God determines what limits to place on each individual.'

Beyond one's own limits

An archer was out walking near a Hindu monastery known for the austerity of its teachings when he saw the monks in the garden, drinking and having fun.

'How cynical you seekers after God's path are,' he said out loud. 'You claim to place great importance on discipline and then get drunk on the quiet.'

'If you were to shoot a hundred arrows one after the other, what would happen to your bow?' asked the oldest of the monks.

'My bow would break,' replied the archer.

'If someone forces himself to go beyond his own limits, then he will break his will,' said the monk. 'If you do not balance work with rest, you will lose your enthusiasm, drain yourself of energy and not achieve very much at all.'

There's still something missing

The yogi Paltrul Rinpoche heard about a hermit who was reputed to be a saint and who lived in the mountains. He went to meet him.

'Where have you come from?' asked the hermit.

'I come from where my back is pointing and I am going towards where my face is turned,' replied Rinpoche. 'A wise man should know that.'

'What a foolish, pseudo-philosophical answer,' muttered the hermit.

'And what do you do, sir?'

'I have been meditating for the last twenty years on perfecting patience. I am close to being considered a saint.'

'People already think you are a saint,' remarked Rinpoche. 'You've managed to deceive them all!'

The hermit leaped angrily to his feet.

'How dare you come here bothering a man in search of sainthood?' he cried.

'You've got a long way to go yet,' said Rinpoche. 'If a silly joke can make you lose the patience for which you've been searching for so long, then the last twenty years have been a complete waste of time!'

An Arab creation myth

In The Book of the Ghost, Alejandro Dolina links the history of sand with one of the creation myths of the Arab people.

According to this myth, as soon as the world had been made, one of the angels pointed out to the Almighty that he had forgotten to put any sand on Earth, a grave omission, given that human beings would be deprived for ever of being able to walk along the seashore, massaging their weary feet and being in direct contact with the ground.

Worse, river beds would always be rough and rocky, architects would be unable to make use of this indispensable material, and the footprints of lovers would be invisible. Eager to remedy this oversight, God despatched the Archangel Gabriel with a huge bag of sand so that he could spread it wherever it was needed.

Gabriel created the beaches and the riverbeds, then made his way back to Heaven, carrying with him the surplus sand, but the Enemy - always watchful, always keen to spoil the Almighty's work - made a hole in the bag, which burst, spilling all its contents. This happened in a place now known as Arabia, and nearly the whole region was transformed into a vast desert.

Distraught, Gabriel went to ask the Lord's forgiveness for having allowed the Enemy to creep up on him unawares. And God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to recompense the Arab people for his messenger's unwitting mistake.

He created for them a heaven full of stars, such as exists nowhere else in the world, so that they would always be gazing skywards.

He created the turban which, beneath the desert sun, is of far more value than a crown.

He created the tent, so that people could move from place to place and thus always have new landscapes around them, without any of

the irritating duties involved in the upkeep of a palace.

He taught the people to forge the best steel for swords. He created the camel. He developed the finest breed of horses.

And he gave them something more precious than all these things together, he gave them the word, the true gold of the Arabs. While other peoples were shaping metals and gemstones, the Arab people were learning to shape the word.

There the poet became priest, judge, doctor and chief of the Bedouin. His verses have the power to provoke joy, sadness, yearning. They can unleash vengeance and war, bring together lovers or reproduce the songs of the birds.

And Alejandro Dolina concludes:

'God's mistakes, like those of great artists or of true lovers, unleash so many happy compensations that sometimes it is almost worth wishing they would happen.'

The game of chess

A young man said to the abbot of a monastery:

'I would really like to become a monk, but I have learned nothing of importance in my life. My father only taught me how to play chess, and that does not lead to enlightenment. And besides, I was told that all games are sinful.'

'They can be sinful, but they can also be a diversion, and perhaps this monastery needs a little of both,' came the reply.

The abbot called for a chessboard and summoned a monk to play with the young man. However, before the game began, he added:

'We may need diversion, but we cannot have everyone playing chess all the time. We will have only the best players here. If our monk loses, he will leave the monastery, thus creating an opening for you.'

The abbot was deadly serious. The young man played an aggressive game, but then he noticed the saintly look in the monk's eyes, and from then on, he began to play deliberately badly. He decided that he would rather lose because he felt that the monk could prove far more useful to the world than him.

Suddenly, the abbot overturned the chessboard onto the floor.

'You learned far more than you were taught,' he said. 'You have the powers of concentration necessary to win and you are capable of fighting for what you want, but you also have compassion and the ability to sacrifice yourself for a noble cause. You have shown yourself capable of balancing discipline and mercy; welcome to our monastery!'

Isaac dies

A certain rabbi was adored by everyone in his community, who were all enchanted with everything he said.

Apart from Isaac, that is, who never missed an opportunity to contradict the rabbi's interpretations and point out errors in his teaching. The others were disgusted by Isaac's behaviour, but could do nothing about it.

One day, Isaac died. During the funeral, the community noticed that the rabbi was looking very sad.

'Why so sad?' asked someone. 'He found fault with everything you did!'

'I'm not sad for my friend, who is now in heaven,' replied the rabbi. 'I am sad for myself. While you all revered me, he challenged me, and so I was forced to improve. Now that he's gone, I'm afraid I might stop growing.'

The price of the question

A rabbi spent his whole life teaching that all the answers to our questions are in ourselves, but his congregation insisted on consulting him about everything they did.

One day, the rabbi had an idea. He placed a notice on the door of his house, saying:

'ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS - 100 MOEDAS PER ANSWER.'

A shopkeeper decided to pay the one hundred moedas. He gave the rabbi the money and said:

'Don't you think that's rather a lot to charge for a question?'

'Yes, I do,' said the rabbi. 'And I have just answered your question. If you want to know anything else, you'll have to pay another one hundred moedas, or else look for the answer

inside yourself, which is far cheaper and much more efficient.'

From then on, no one bothered him.

Forgiving in the same spirit

Rabbi Nahum of Chernobyl was the object of constant insults from a shopkeeper. One day, the man's business began to go downhill.

'It must be the rabbi, asking for vengeance from God,' he thought. And he went to apologise to the rabbi.

'I forgive you in the same spirit in which you forgive me,' replied the rabbi.

Yet the man continued to lose money hand over fist until, finally, he was reduced to abject poverty. Nahum's disciples were horrified and went to ask the rabbi what had happened.

'I forgave him, but deep down in his heart, he still hated me,' said the rabbi. 'His hatred contaminated everything he did, and so God's punishment proved even more severe.'

A traditional Sufi story

Many years ago, in a poor Chinese village, there lived a farmer and his son. His only material possession, apart from the land and a small hut, was a horse he had inherited from his father.

One day, the horse ran away, leaving the man with no animal with which to work the land. His neighbours, who respected him for his honesty and diligence, went to his house to say how much they regretted his loss. He thanked them for their visit, but asked:

'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune in my life?'

Someone muttered to a friend: 'He obviously doesn't want to face facts, but let him think what he likes, after all, it's better than being sad about it.'

And the neighbours went away again, pretending to agree with what he had said.

A week later, the horse returned to its stable, but it was not alone; it brought with it a beautiful mare for company. The inhabitants of the village were thrilled when they heard the news, for only then did they understand the reply the man had given them, and they went back to the farmer's house to congratulate him on his good fortune.

'Instead of one horse, you've got two. Congratulations!' they said.

'Many thanks for your visit and for your solidarity,' replied the farmer. 'But how do you know that what happened was a blessing in my life?'

The neighbours were rather put out and decided that the man must be going mad, and, as they left, they said: 'Doesn't the man realise that the horse is a gift from God?'

A month later, the farmer's son decided to break the mare in. However, the animal bucked

wildly and threw the boy off; the boy fell awkwardly and broke his leg.

The neighbours returned to the farmer's house, bringing presents for the injured boy. The mayor of the village solemnly presented his condolences to the father, saying how sad they all were about what had occurred.

The man thanked them for their visit and for their kindness, but he asked:

'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune in my life?'

These words left everyone dumbstruck, because they were all quite sure that the son's accident was a real tragedy. As they left the farmer's house, they said to each other: 'Now he really has gone mad; his only son could be left permanently crippled, and he's not sure whether the accident was a misfortune or not!'

A few months went by, and Japan declared war on China. The emperor's emissaries scoured the country for healthy young men to be sent to the front. When they reached the village, they

recruited all the young men, except the farmer's son, whose leg had not yet mended.

None of the young men came back alive. The son recovered, and the two horses produced foals that were all sold for a good price. The farmer went to visit his neighbours to console and to help them, since they had always shown him such solidarity. Whenever any of them complained, the farmer would say: 'How do you know that what happened was a misfortune?' If someone was overjoyed about something, he would ask: 'How do you know that what happened was a blessing?' And the people of the village came to understand that life has other meanings that go beyond mere appearance.

Trees and towns

In the Mojave desert, one often comes across those famous ghost towns that were built around the gold mines. They were abandoned when all the gold had been mined out. They had served their purpose and there was no reason for anyone to go on living there.

When we walk through a forest, we see trees which, once they have served their purpose, have fallen. However, unlike ghost towns, their fall has opened up space for light to penetrate, they have enriched the soil and their trunks are covered in new vegetation.

Our old age will depend on the way we have lived. We can either end up like a ghost town or like a generous tree, which continues to be important even after its fall.

On rhythm and the road

'There was something you didn't mention in your talk about the Road to Santiago,' said a pilgrim as we were leaving the Casa de Galicia, in Madrid, where I had given a lecture only minutes before.

I'm sure there were many things I didn't mention, since my intention had been merely to share something of my own experience. Nevertheless, I invited her for a cup of coffee, intrigued to know what this important omission was.

And Begoña - for that is her name - said:

'I've noticed that most pilgrims, whether on the Road to Santiago or on any of life's paths, always try to follow the rhythm set by others.

At the start of my pilgrimage, I tried to keep up with my group, but I got tired. I was demanding too much of my body. I was tense

all the time and I ended up straining the tendons in my left foot. I couldn't walk for two days, and I realised that I would only reach Santiago if I obeyed my own rhythm.

I took longer than the others to get there, and for long stretches I often had to walk alone, but it was only by respecting my own rhythm that I managed to complete the journey. Ever since then, I have applied this to everything I do in life: I follow my own rhythm.'

Everything will come to dust

The fiestas in the Spanish city of Valencia involve a curious ritual, which has its origins in the ancient community of carpenters there.

During the year, artisans and artists make gigantic wooden sculptures. In the week of the fiesta, these sculptures are placed in the middle of the main square. People look, pass comment, and feel amazed and moved at such creativity. Then on St Joseph's day, all these works of art - apart from one - are burned on a huge bonfire, before thousands of onlookers.

'All that work for nothing!' said an Englishwoman at my side, while the vast flames rose up to the skies.

'You too will come to an end one day,' replied a Spanish woman. 'Just imagine if an

angel were to say to God then: "All that work for nothing.'"

The cracked pitcher

An Indian legend tells of a man who used to carry water every day to his village, using two large pitchers tied on either end of a piece of wood, which he placed across his shoulders.

One of the pitchers was older than the other and was full of small cracks; every time the man came back along the path to his house, half of the water was lost.

For two years, the man made the same journey. The younger pitcher was always very proud of the way it did its work and was sure that it was up to the task for which it had been created, while the other pitcher was mortally ashamed that it could carry out only half its task, even though it knew that the cracks were the result of long years of work.

So ashamed was the old pitcher that, one day, while the man was preparing to fill it up

with water from the well, it decided to speak to him.

'I wish to apologise because, due to my age, you only manage to take home half the water you fill me with, and thus quench only half the thirst awaiting you in your house.'

The man smiled and said:

'When we go back, be sure to take a careful look at the path.'

The pitcher did as the man asked and noticed many flowers and plants growing along one side of the path.

'Do you see how much more beautiful nature is on your side of the road?' the man remarked. 'I knew you had cracks, but I decided to take advantage of them. I sowed vegetables and flowers there, and you always watered them. I've picked dozens of roses to decorate my house, and my children have had lettuce, cabbage and onions to eat. If you were not the way you are, I could never have done this. We all, at some point, grow old and acquire other

qualities which can always be turned to good advantage.'

How the path was made

In issue 106 of Jornalinho (Portugal), I found a story that has a lot to teach us about the unthinking choices we make.

One day, a calf needed to cross an area of virgin forest in order to return to its field. Being an irrational animal, it forged a tortuous, curving path, going up hill and down dale.

The following day, a dog passed that way and used the same path to cross the forest. Then it was the turn of a ram, the leader of a flock, who, seeing the path already opened, led his companions along it.

Later, men began to use the path too: they came and went, turning to right and left, having to crouch down and to avoid obstacles, all the while complaining and cursing - and quite rightly too. But they did nothing about creating an alternative.

After all this intensive use, the path became a small road along which laboured poor, heavily-laden animals, obliged to spend three hours covering a distance which, had they not followed the path forged by the calf, could easily have been covered in thirty minutes.

Many years passed, and the little road became the main street of a small town, and later the principal avenue of a city. Everyone complained about the traffic, because the road followed the worst possible route.

Throughout all this, the wise old forest laughed to see how blindly men follow the path already made, never asking themselves if that is indeed the best choice.

Travelling differently

I realized very early on that, for me, travelling was the best way of learning. I still have a pilgrim soul, and I thought that I would use this column to pass on some of the lessons I have learned, in the hope that they might prove useful to other pilgrims like me.

1. Avoid museums. This might seem to be absurd advice, but let's just think about it a little: if you are in a foreign city, isn't it far more interesting to go in search of the present than of the past? It's just that people feel obliged to go to museums because they learned as children that travelling was about seeking out that kind of culture. Obviously museums are important, but they require time and objectivity - you need to know what you want to see there, otherwise you will leave with a sense of having seen a few

really fundamental things, except that you can't remember what they were.

2. Hang out in bars. Bars are the places where life in the city reveals itself, not in museums. By bars I don't mean nightclubs, but the places where ordinary people go, have a drink, ponder the weather, and are always ready for a chat. Buy a newspaper and enjoy the ebb and flow of people. If someone strikes up a conversation, however silly, join in: you cannot judge the beauty of a particular path just by looking at the gate.

3. Be open. The best tour guide is someone who lives in the place, knows everything about it, is proud of his or her city, but does not work for any agency. Go out into the street, choose the person you want to talk to, and ask them something (Where is the cathedral? Where is the post office?). If nothing comes of it, try someone else - I guarantee that at the end of the day you will have found yourself an excellent companion.

4. Try to travel alone or - if you are married - with your spouse. It will be harder work, no one will be there taking care of you, but only in this way can you truly leave your own country behind. Travelling with a group is a way of being in a foreign country while speaking your mother tongue, doing whatever the leader of the flock tells you to do, and taking more interest in group gossip than in the place you are visiting.

5. Don't compare. Don't compare anything - prices, standards of hygiene, quality of life, means of transport, nothing! You are not travelling in order to prove that you have a better life than other people - your aim is to find out how other people live, what they can teach you, how they deal with reality and with the extraordinary.

6. Understand that everyone understands you. Even if you don't speak the language, don't be afraid: I've been in lots of places where I could not communicate with words at all, and I always found support, guidance, useful advice, and even girlfriends. Some people think that if

they travel alone, they will set off down the street and be lost for ever. Just make sure you have the hotel card in your pocket and - if the worst comes to the worst - flag down a taxi and show the card to the driver.

7. Don't buy too much. Spend your money on things you won't need to carry: tickets to a good play, restaurants, trips. Nowadays, with the global economy and the Internet, you can buy anything you want without having to pay excess baggage.

8. Don't try to see the world in a month. It is far better to stay in a city for four or five days than to visit five cities in a week. A city is like a capricious woman: she takes time to be seduced and to reveal herself completely.

9. A journey is an adventure. Henry Miller used to say that it is far more important to discover a church that no one else has ever heard of than to go to Rome and feel obliged to visit the Sistine Chapel with two hundred thousand other tourists bellowing in your ear. By all means go to the Sistine Chapel, but

wander the streets too, explore alleyways, experience the freedom of looking for something - quite what you don't know - but which, if you find it, will - you can be sure - change your life.

The missing stone

One of the great monuments in the city of Kyoto is a Zen garden consisting of an area of sand and fifteen rocks.

The original garden had sixteen rocks. The story goes that as soon as the gardener had finished his work, he called the emperor to see it.

'Magnificent,' said the emperor. 'It is the loveliest garden in Japan. And this is the most beautiful rock in the garden.'

The gardener immediately removed the rock that the emperor had so admired and threw it away.

'Now the garden is perfect,' he said to the emperor. 'There is nothing in particular that stands out, and it can be seen now in all its harmony. A garden, like life, needs to be seen in

its totality. If we linger over the beauty of one detail, the rest will seem ugly.'

Heaven and hell

A violent samurai warrior with a reputation for provoking fights for no reason arrived at the gates of a Zen monastery and asked to speak to the master.

Without hesitating, Ryokan went to meet him.

'They say that intelligence is more powerful than brute force,' said the samurai. 'Can you explain to me what heaven and hell are?'

Ryokan said nothing.

'You see?' bellowed the samurai. 'I could explain quite easily: to show someone what hell is, you just have to punch them. To show them what heaven is, you just have threaten them with terrible violence and then let them go.'

'I don't talk to stupid people like you,' said the Zen master.

The blood rushed to the samurai's head. His brain became thick with hatred.

'That is hell,' said Ryokan, smiling. 'Allowing yourself to be upset by silly remarks.'

Taken aback by the monk's courage, the samurai warrior softened.

'And that is heaven,' said Ryokan, inviting him in. 'Not reacting to foolish provocations.'

The kingdom of this world

An old hermit was once invited to go to the court of the most powerful king of the age.

'I envy a holy man like you, who contents himself with so little,' remarked the king.

'I envy Your Majesty, who contents himself with even less than me,' replied the hermit.

'How can you say that when the whole of this country belongs to me?' said the king, offended.

'For precisely that reason. I have the music of the celestial spheres, I have the rivers and the mountains of the entire world, I have the moon and the sun, because I have God in my heart. All Your Majesty has, on the other hand, is this kingdom.'

Ancestral bones

There was once a king of Spain who was very proud of his ancestors, and who was known for his cruelty towards those weaker than himself.

One day, he was travelling with his entourage through a field in Aragon where, years before, his father had died in battle; there he met a holy man rummaging around in a huge pile of bones.

'What are you doing?' asked the king.

'All honour to Your Majesty!' said the holy man. 'When I learned that the king of Spain was coming here, I decided to collect together the bones of your late father and give them to you. But however hard I look, I cannot find them, for they are exactly the same as the bones of peasants, poor men, beggars and slaves.'

Call another kind of doctor

A powerful monarch summoned a holy father - who was said by everyone to have healing powers - to help him with the pains in his back.

'God will help us,' said the holy man. 'But first let us understand the reasons for these pains. I would suggest that Your Majesty make your confession now, for confession forces a man to confront his problems and frees him from many feelings of guilt.'

Annoyed at being asked to think about his problems, the king said:

'I don't want to talk about such things; I need someone who can cure me without asking so many questions.'

The priest left and returned half an hour later with another man.

'I believe that words can relieve pain and help me discover the correct path to a cure,' he said. 'Since you do not wish to talk, however, I cannot help you. But I have here just the man you need: my friend is a veterinary surgeon and is accustomed to not talking to his patients.'

The most dangerous part

A king gathered together a group of wise men to decide which was the most important part of the body. The endocrinologist declared that it was the glands because they regulated all the bodily functions; the neurologist said it was the heart because, without it, the glands would not work. The nutritionists assured him it was the stomach because, without food, the heart would not have the strength to beat.

The wisest of all the wise men listened in silence. Since they could not reach an agreement, they asked his opinion.

'All those parts are essential for life,' he said. 'If one of them is lacking, then the body dies. But the most important part does not actually exist: that is the imaginary channel that links the ear and the tongue. If there are any problems with this channel, the man starts

saying things he did not hear and then, not only the body dies, but the soul is condemned for ever.'

A fairy tale

In ancient China, around the year 250 B.C., a certain prince of the region of Thing-Zda was about to be crowned emperor; however, according to the law, he first had to get married.

Since this meant choosing the future empress, the prince needed to find a young woman whom he could trust absolutely. On the advice of a wise man, he decided to summon all the young women of the region in order to find the most worthy candidate.

An old lady, who had served in the palace for many years, heard about the preparations for this gathering and felt very sad, for her daughter nurtured a secret love for the prince.

When the old lady got home, she told her daughter and was horrified to learn that her daughter intended going to the palace.

The old lady was desperate.

'But, daughter, what on earth will you do there? All the richest and most beautiful girls from the court will be present. It's a ridiculous idea! I know you must be suffering, but don't turn that suffering into madness.'

And the daughter replied:

'My dear mother, I am not suffering and I certainly haven't gone mad. I know that I won't be chosen, but it's my one chance to spend at least a few moments close to the prince, and that makes me happy, even though I know that a quite different fate awaits me.'

That night, when the young woman reached the palace, all the most beautiful girls were indeed there, wearing the most beautiful clothes and the most beautiful jewellery, and prepared to do anything to seize the opportunity on offer.

Surrounded by the members of his court, the prince announced a challenge.

'I will give each of you a seed. In six months' time, the young woman who brings me

the loveliest flower will be the future empress of China.'

The girl took her seed and planted it in a pot, and since she was not very skilled in the art of gardening, she prepared the soil with great patience and tenderness, for she believed that if the flowers grew as large as her love, then she need not worry about the results.

Three months passed and no shoots had appeared. The young woman tried everything; she consulted farmers and peasants, who showed her the most varied methods of cultivation, but all to no avail. Each day she felt that her dream had moved farther off, although her love was as alive as ever.

At last, the six months were up, and still nothing had grown in her pot. Even though she had nothing to show, she knew how much effort and dedication she had put in during that time, and so she told her mother that she would go back to the palace on the agreed date and at the agreed hour. Inside she knew that this

would be her last meeting with her true love and she would not have missed it for the world.

The day of the audience arrived. The girl appeared with her plantless pot, and saw that all the other candidates had achieved wonderful results: each girl bore a flower lovelier than the last, in the most varied forms and colours.

Finally, the longed-for moment came. The prince entered and he studied each of the candidates with great care and attention. Having inspected them all, he announced the result and chose the servant's daughter as his new wife.

All the other girls present began to protest, saying that he had chosen the only one of them who had not managed to grow anything at all.

Then the prince calmly explained the reasoning behind the challenge:

'This young woman was the only one who cultivated the flower that made her worthy of becoming the empress: the flower of honesty. All the seeds I handed out were sterile, and nothing could ever have grown from them.'

(Adapted from a story sent in by Maria Emilia Voss)

The smiling couple (London, 1977)

I was married to Cecília MacDowell and - at a period in my life when I had decided to give up everything for which I no longer felt any enthusiasm - we went to live in London. We stayed in a small, second-floor flat in Palace Street and we were having great difficulty making new friends. However, every night, a young couple would leave the pub next door and walk past our window waving and calling to us to come down.

I was extremely worried about bothering the neighbours, and so I never went down, pretending, instead, that it had nothing to do with me. But the couple kept calling up to us, even when there was no one at the window.

One night, I did go down to complain about the noise. Their laughter immediately turned to sadness; they apologised and went away. That night, I realised that, although we very much wanted to make new friends, I was far more concerned about 'what the neighbours would say'.

I decided that the next time, I would invite the couple up to have a drink with us. I waited all week at the window, at the time they usually passed, but they never came back. I started going to the pub in the hope of seeing them, but the owner of the pub claimed not to know them.

I placed a notice in the window saying: 'Call again'. All this achieved was that, one night, a group of drunks began hurling every swearword under the sun at our window, and our neighbour - the one I had been so worried about - ended up complaining to the landlord.

I never saw the couple again.

The search to be different

Do you know exactly where you are now? You are in a city, along with a lot of other people, and it is highly likely that, at this very moment, various people are sheltering in their hearts the same hopes and anxieties that you are sheltering in yours.

Let us go further: you are a microscopic speck on the surface of a ball. This ball spins around another ball, which, in turn, is located in one tiny corner of a galaxy along with millions of other similar balls.

This galaxy forms part of something called the Universe, full of vast star clusters. No one knows exactly where this Universe begins and ends.

This does not mean that you are not of vital importance; you struggle, you strive, you try to improve, you have dreams, you are made happy or sad by love. If you were not alive, something would be missing.

Here are some stories about our right to be unique.

The giant tree

A carpenter and his apprentices were travelling through the province of Qi in search of building materials. They saw a giant tree; five men all holding hands could not encompass its girth, and its crown reached almost to the clouds.

'Let's not waste our time with this tree,' said the master carpenter. 'It would take us for ever to cut it down. If we wanted to make a ship out of that heavy trunk, the ship would sink. If we tried to use it to build a roof, the walls would have to be specially reinforced.'

The group continued on its way. One of the apprentices remarked:

'Such a big tree and no use to anyone!'

'That's where you're wrong,' said the master carpenter. 'The tree was true to its own destiny. If it had been like all the others, we would have

cut it down. But because it had the courage to be different, it will remain alive and strong for a long time yet.'

I want to be an angel

Abbot João Pequeno thought: 'I'm tired of being a mere man, I should be like the angels who do nothing but contemplate the glory of God.' That night, he left the monastery of Sceta and set off into the desert.

A week later, he came back to the monastery. Brother Gatekeeper heard him knocking and asked who it was.

'It's Abbot João,' he replied. 'I'm hungry.'

'That's not possible,' said Brother Gatekeeper. 'Abbot João is in the desert, transforming himself into an angel. He no longer feels hunger and has no need to work for his food.'

'Forgive my arrogance,' replied Abbot João. 'The angels help humanity, that is their job; that is why they do not need to eat, but merely to contemplate. But I am a man, and the only way

in which I can contemplate that same glory is by doing what the angels do and help my fellow human beings. Fasting won't get me anywhere.'

Hearing this humble explanation, Brother Gatekeeper opened the gate of the monastery.

Which is the best example to follow?

Dov Beer of Mezeritch was asked:

'Which is the best example to follow? That of the pious man who dedicates his life to God without ever asking why, or that of the erudite man, who tries to understand the will of the Almighty?'

'The best example to follow is that of the child,' replied Dov Beer.

'But a child knows nothing. It doesn't even understand what reality is!' was the general response.

'There you are much mistaken, because the child has four qualities that we should never forget. A child is always happy for no reason. A child is always busy. When a child wants something, he or she shows great persistence

and determination in demanding that thing. Lastly, a child is always very quick to stop crying.'

The importance of the forest

'All the teachers say that spiritual treasure is something one finds alone. So why are we all here together?' asked a disciple of the Sufi master Nasrudin.

'You are all here together because a forest is always stronger than a lone tree,' replied Nasrudin. 'The forest maintains the humidity in the air, it resists the hurricane, and it helps to make the soil fertile. But what makes a tree strong is its root, and the root of one plant cannot help another plant to grow. Working together towards the same end and allowing each one to grow in his own way, that is the path for those who wish to commune with God.'

The divine melody

Zaki heard Xa asking his friends what was the most beautiful sound on Earth.

'The sound of the flute,' said one.

'Birdsong,' said another.

'A woman's voice,' said a third.

They continued the discussion late into the night, without reaching any conclusion.

Days later, Zaki invited Xa and his friends to supper. In the room next door, the best orchestra in the world was playing lovely music, but there was no food on the table. Around midnight, by which time his guests were all starving hungry, Zaki finally served up an exquisite banquet.

'After hours without eating, isn't the clatter of cutlery on plates a divine sound?' remarked Xa.

'I am simply answering your question about what is the most beautiful sound on Earth,' replied Zaki. 'It could be the voice of the woman we love, the singing of birds, the clatter of plates, the breathing beside us in bed of someone dear to us, but it will always be the sound that our heart needs to hear at that precise moment.'

How one of the most important books in the world came to be written

In the twenty-third year of the reign of Zhao, Lao Tzu realised that the war would ultimately destroy the place where he lived. Since he had spent years meditating on the essence of life, he knew that there are times when one has to be practical. He made the simplest possible decision: to move.

He took his few belongings and set off for Han Keou. As he was leaving the city, he met a gatekeeper.

'Where is an eminent sage like you going?' asked the gatekeeper.

'Somewhere far from the war.'

'You can't just leave like that. I would like to know what you have learned after all these years of meditation. I will only let you leave, if you share what you know with me.'

Simply in order to get rid of the man, Lao Tzu wrote a slender volume right there and then, and gave that one copy to the gatekeeper. Then he went on his way, and was never heard of again.

Further copies of Lao Tzu's book were made, it crossed centuries, it crossed millennia, and reached our time. It is called Tao te ching and is, quite simply, essential reading. Here are a few examples from its pages:

He who knows others is wise.
He who knows himself is enlightened.
He who conquers others is strong.
He who conquers himself is powerful.
He who knows joy is rich.
He who keeps to his path has will.
Be humble and you will remain whole.
Bow down and you will remain erect.
Empty yourself and you will remain full.

Wear yourself out and you will remain new.

The wise man does not show himself, and that is why he shines.

He does not attract attention to himself, and that is why he is noticed.

He does not praise himself, and that is why he has merit.

And because he is not competing, no one in the world can compete with him.

Between faith and prayer

'Is there anything more important than prayer?' a disciple asked his teacher.

The teacher told the disciple to go to a nearby tree and cut off a branch. The disciple obeyed.

'Is the tree still alive?' asked the teacher.

'As alive as it was before.'

'Then go over there and slice through its roots.'

'If I do that, the tree will die.'

'Prayers are the branches of a tree whose roots are called Faith,' said the teacher. 'Faith can exist without prayer, but prayer cannot exist without faith.'

Do not accept minor misdeeds

The teacher asked his disciples to go and find something to eat. They were travelling and could find no proper food.

The disciples came back later that afternoon. Each brought with him the little he had gleaned from other people's charity: rotten fruit, stale bread, sour wine.

However, one of the disciples returned with a bag of ripe apples.

'I will always do all I can to help my teacher and my brothers,' he said, sharing out the apples with the others.

'Where did you get them from?' asked his teacher.

'I had to steal them. People only wanted to give me leftovers, even though they know that we preach the word of God.'

'Leave us this minute and take your apples with you, and never come back,' said the teacher. 'The ends never justify the means, however noble those ends might be. If you steal for me today, tomorrow you might end up stealing from me.'

The way of the tiger

A man was walking through a forest when he saw a crippled fox. 'I wonder how it manages to feed itself,' he thought. At that moment, a tiger approached, carrying its prey in its mouth. The tiger ate its fill and left what remained for the fox.

'If God helps the fox, he will help me too,' the man thought. He went back home, shut himself up in his house and waited for the Heavens to bring him food.

Nothing happened. Just when he was becoming too weak to go out and work, an angel appeared.

'Why did you decide to imitate the crippled fox?' asked the angel. 'Get out of bed, pick up your tools and follow the way of the tiger!'

Absolute control

Each person knows how best to be at peace with life; some need at least some degree of security, others launch themselves fearlessly into danger. There are no formulae for living out one's dream: each of us, by listening to our own heart, will know how best to act.

The American writer Sherwood Anderson was always extremely undisciplined and only managed to write when fuelled by his own rebelliousness. His first publishers, concerned about the abject poverty in which Anderson lived, decided to send him a weekly cheque as an advance on his next novel.

After a month, they received a visit from the writer, who returned all the cheques.

'I haven't been able to write a line in weeks,' said Anderson. 'I just can't write with financial security staring at me across the desk.'

Believing without seeing

An emperor said to the Rabbi Yeoschoua ben Hanania:

'I would very much like to see your God.'

'That is impossible,' said the Rabbi.

'Impossible? Then how can I entrust my life to someone whom I cannot see?'

'Show me the pocket in which you have placed the love of your wife, and let me weigh it in order to see how large her love is.'

'Don't be silly; no one can keep someone's love in their pocket.'

'The sun is only one of the works which the Lord placed in the universe and yet you cannot look at it directly. You cannot see love either, but you know you are capable of falling in love with a woman and entrusting your life to her. Is it not clear then that there are certain things in

which we trust even though we cannot see them?'

The hidden face

Nasrudin went to the house of a rich man to ask for money for charity.

A page opened the door.

'Tell the Mullah that Nasrudin is here and needs money to help others,' said the wise man.

The page went back inside and returned a few minutes later.

'My master is not at home.'

'Allow me then to give him a piece of advice, even though he has not contributed to any charitable works. The next time he is away from home, tell him not to leave his face at the window, otherwise people might think he is lying.'

Seeing yourself

'When you look at your companions, try to see yourself,' said the Japanese teacher Okakura Kakuso.

'But isn't that an awfully selfish attitude?' asked a disciple. 'If we are always concerned about ourselves, we will never see the good things that others have to offer.'

'If only we did always see the good things in others,' replied Kakuso. 'But the truth is that when we look at another person, we are only looking for defects. We try to discover his wicked side because we want him to be worse than us. We never forgive him when he hurts us because we do not believe that we would ever be forgiven. We manage to wound him with harsh words, declaring that we are telling the truth, when all we are doing is trying to hide it from ourselves. We pretend that we are

important so that no one else will see how fragile we are. That is why whenever you judge your brother, be aware that you are the one who is on trial.'

In a bar in Buenos Aires

I am with the Venezuelan writer Dulce Rojas, drinking coffee in Buenos Aires; we are discussing the idea of peace and how removed it has become from the human heart. Dulce then tells me the following story.

A king offered a large prize to the artist who could best represent the idea of peace. A lot of painters sent their works to the palace, depicting woods at dusk, quiet rivers, children playing on the sand, rainbows in the sky, drops of dew on a rose petal.

The king examined everything that was sent to him, but ended up choosing only two works.

The first showed a tranquil lake that perfectly mirrored the imposing mountains surrounding it and the blue sky above. The sky was dotted with small white clouds and, if you looked closely, in the left-hand corner of the

lake there stood a small house with one window open and smoke rising from the chimney - the sign that a frugal but tasty supper was being prepared.

The second painting was also of mountains, but these were bleak and stony with sharp, sheer peaks. Above the mountains, the sky was implacably dark, and from the heavy clouds fell lightning, hail and torrential rain.

The painting was totally out of harmony with the other submissions. However, a closer look revealed a bird's nest lodged in a crack in one of those inhospitable rocks. In the midst of the violent roaring of the storm, a swallow was calmly sitting on its nest.

When he gathered his court together, the king chose the second picture as the one that best expressed the idea of peace. He explained:

'Peace is not what we find in a place that is free of noise, problems and hard work; peace is what allows us to preserve the calm in our hearts, even in the most adverse situations. That is its true and only meaning.'